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The “Color-Line” Criticism: Literary Fiction, Historical Facts, and the Critical Controversies about William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Abstract. This article analyses critical responses to William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, claiming that the reception of the novel was strongly determined by the question of race and the different perception-and-interpretation of a “common” history by black and white Americans. I demonstrate that the polemics about Styron’s novel resulted not only from an entirely different understanding by white and black critics of the question as to what literature is essentially and what social role it has to perform, but also from the incompatible implementation of historiography, in the realm of which both sides placed the novel. I argue that, as a result, the critical controversies about *The Confessions* were drawn along the so-called “color line”, a category which traditionally defined Americans according to their race.

Keywords: American history, color line, criticism, historical facts, historical novel, literary fiction, race, slavery.

When Amiri Baraka – the poet and playwright who had initiated the Black Arts Movement four decades before (a movement which demanded from African American artists that they practice art ideologically and politically engaged) – performed in 2002 “Somebody Blew Up America,” his poem-reaction to the September 11 terrorist attack, the American press and media exploded in a debate about the limits of what can be expressed in literature in a society with a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech. The poet was accused of antisemitism and anti-Americanism. In the opinion of some literary critics, myself included, Baraka was wrongfully accused. Among the “means of persuasion” used by his opponents was an attempt to remove him from the position of Poet Laureate of New Jersey. Due to the fact that the poet did not remain silent – he gave many interviews and published a statement in the leftist magazine *Counterpunch*, in which he explained why he had refused the New Jersey Governor’s call for him to resign. (Because there was no provision in the law for removing a state poet laureate, state authorities decided to abolish the post altogether.) One conspicuous feature of the campaign against Baraka was that his critics concentrated solely on the alleged ideological message of the poem and completely ignored its strictly artistic dimension. Few articles took into consideration or even mentioned the poem’s literary value, its original poetics, the variety of means of expression used, the virtuosic implementation of non-standard linguistic forms characteristic of so-called “black speech,” its jazz-inspired rhythm, and the fact that it belongs in the long American tradition of politically engaged poetry (see: Gwiazda 2004; and Kamionowski 2011).

I am recalling this almost-contemporary event as a context to the comparably violent and tempestuous response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a novel published in 1967. As in the case of Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America," the reception of Styron's novel was strongly determined by the question of race and the different perception and interpretation of a "common" history by black and white Americans. Those two issues focused the controversies about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. However, it needs to be pointed out that the literary critics, writers, historians, and sociologists who defended Styron and his novel against the attacks of "black radicals," attempted to concentrate the discussion on historical facts, formal literary questions, and the "universal" message of the book, entirely separating it from its racial context and from ideological arguments about history, including the contemporary history taking place "here and now," at the end of the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the fact that Styron received for *The Confessions of Nat Turner* two prestigious literary awards – the Pulitzer Prize in 1968 and the Howells Medal for Fiction in 1970 (the latter granted every five years for the best novel of that period) – seems to have an ideological aspect to it, and can be perceived as a kind of demonstration of the power of American intellectual elites to decide who receives literary prizes and other prestigious distinctions; even more so in the context of what happened to Baraka a decade ago. Apparently Styron willingly took part in this game when he, unlike Baraka, distanced himself from any ideological questions in the interviews and meetings with his readers that followed the publication of the novel.

In a speech that he made on the occasion of receiving the Howells Medal for Fiction, Styron said:

By recognizing *Nat Turner* this award really honors all of those of my contemporaries who have steadfastly refused to write propaganda or indulge in myth-making but have been impelled to search instead for those insights which, however raggedly and imperfectly, attempt to demonstrate the variety, the quirkiness, the fragility, the courage, the good humor, desperation, corruption, and mortality of all men. And finally it ratifies my own conviction that a writer jeopardizes his very freedom by insisting that he be bound or defined by his race, or by almost anything else. (Styron 1982: 226-227)

Yet how can one be sure that Styron – the apologist of an unrestrained artistic freedom – is not defined and limited by his own race? Does the fact that he describes his writerly intentions in terms of "universal" human experience provide such certainty? Moreover, the words he uses, such as "propaganda" and "myth-making," obviously serve the purpose of depreciating the standpoint of the most fervent and negative voices among the novel's criticism and, though not stated directly, refer to the articles and comments of those black critics who not only had voiced a number of concrete reservations about the novel but also launched a frontal attack against its author, a representative sample of which comprises the book *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* published in 1968.

However, the fact that this attack was carried out in a peremptorily hysterical tone characteristic of the ideological rabidness of the Black Arts Movement period does not necessarily mean that the accusations formulated against Styron do not contain at least a grain of truth (the mechanism of a rejection of the merit of a linguistic statement on the basis of its unacceptably "too emotional" form has been recognized and described by feminist critics – for instance Dale Spender, in her book *Man Made Language*). Arguably, Styron's statements in the interviews collected in the volume titled *Conversations with William Styron* not only are identical – in terms of tone and content – with the extract from his acceptance speech for the Howells Medal quoted above, but also read like examples of the language of the "solipsistic universal" whose distinctive feature is, according to Craig Werner, the fact that "[m]embers of the dominant group, typically unaware of the unstated premises of their

behavior ... proceed as if by serving their own interests they were serving the ultimate good” (Werener 1986: 62).

Reading critical articles and comments on Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* – frequently written in a polemical form and characterized by a confrontational tone – it is difficult to resist the impression that both sides of the conflict tried hard to play with marked cards and ascribe various dishonest intentions and manipulative purposes to their adversaries, claiming objectivity and impartiality for themselves. But even worse is the fact that the controversies about Styron’s novel were drawn along the so-called “color line,” a category which traditionally defined Americans according to their race; hence, attempts to overcome the controversies seem to have been doomed to failure from the very start. Undoubtedly, the vitriolic language of the attack on Styron used in the essays by the ten black writers, and the implementation of invective such as “racist,” “liar,” and “supporter of slavery,” or accusing him of “moral cowardice” must be perceived as exaggerated if not directly abusive. Nonetheless, many of the claims and observations made by the white critics, though expressed in a much more balanced manner, must raise similar doubts.

The most important differences in perception of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared within two closely connected spheres: first, Styron’s treatment of historical facts and events; and second, the writer’s representation of the historical Nat Turner. These two questions became important for discussion of the novel not only because of the problem of faithfulness to historical truth about the event which provided the theme of the novel, but also because, as John Thompson (1982: 163) puts it, although “[t]he book aspires to be more than a tract, yet today [i.e. at a time of racial protests which often took the form of riots], a book about a Negro who leads other Negroes to murder men, women, and children solely because they are white, cannot avoid becoming the matter of editorials, sermons, panels, and shouting matches.” Apparently, it was the immediate social context that provoked such fervent polemics.

Styron’s novel treats about a slave rebellion (called at that time an “insurrection”) started in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 by Nat Turner, who gathered a group of supporters recruited both among the slaves from the neighborhood and black freemen. The group began its march on a local town, Jerusalem, killing on its way white families in their houses. The insurrection lasted only a few days during which the rebels killed fifty-five white men, women and children, using hatchets, axes, knives, and blunt tools. Turner himself murdered only one person – a young white woman whose name was Margaret Whitehead. The rebellion was suppressed by intervention of the white militia, and its participants taken to court. Eighteen of them – including the leader – were sentenced to death by hanging; the others were acquitted or sold out of state. Simultaneously, in the county where the insurrection took place, its white inhabitants carried out a series of pogroms and murdered over two hundred black people.

Nonetheless, Styron does not limit himself to an external relation of those dramatic events in a novelistic form, but gives the narrative voice to Nat Turner himself who tells his own life story. This formal decision results from the author’s belief that the reason for the rebellion must be looked for in its leader’s psychology. In many interviews given after the publication of the novel, Styron emphasizes that writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* he was interested in finding an answer to the question why such a bloody slave rebellion happened in Virginia, where the system of slavery was relatively mild, and, what is more, at a time when there was a debate going on as to whether slavery should not be abolished altogether in the state. It must be remembered, however, that this debate was not initiated for humanitarian reasons, but because of the fact that Virginia was experiencing economic dire straits: its very intensive

tobacco cultivation had led to impoverishment of the soil, and many farmers simply could not afford to keep slaves anymore.

But let us go back to the of controversies about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The polemical arguments concerning the first issue – i.e. the faithfulness to the historical facts and events Styron's novel draws upon – concentrated on the problem to what extent any literary fiction based on real events and historical characters must or should respect their integrity, and to what extent it is acceptable to modify them for the sake of art itself. As George Core (1981: 212) points out, obviously Styron did not follow E. M. W. Tillyard's observations pertaining to the characteristics of a well-written historical novel, among which the scholar mentions two fundamental rules: first, never to concentrate too much on major historical figures; and second, to avoid representing in detail major historical events. According to the critic, by respecting those rules a novelist protects the literary art from becoming entirely dependent on history. In "Author's Note," which precedes the text of the novel, Styron says:

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events. (Styron 1967: n. p.) (emphasis in original)

And he adds immediately that his work is "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history." (Styron 1967: n. p.)

As Styron says himself, he took his knowledge of the facts he draws on in the novel from two sources: a twenty-page long confession that was made by Nat Turner in prison during the three days which preceded his execution and written down by a lawyer named Thomas R. Gray (which gave the idea for the title of the novel), and from William S. Drewry's Ph.D. dissertation *The Southampton Insurrection* (1900).

Nevertheless, even if we strongly believe in and respect the autonomy of literature, we should not disregard the fact that a narrativisation of historical events always has a powerful influence on their perception in the mass imagination and that – identically to the case of chronicles and scholarly historical works – selection of material is absolutely vital: things omitted frequently turn out to be as important as those preserved and thoroughly researched. Therefore, even though the majority of white critics praised Styron's novel for capturing the essence of slavery in universally human categories, it is impossible to discredit Mike Thelwell's valid comment that it is difficult to talk about the essence without a substance.

Yet despite his argumentation being the most eloquent and persuasive among the ten black writers, Thelwell himself, when he points out the lack of a solid background that would confront the reader with the scale of cruelty of the American system of slavery, seems to forget that this "deficiency" results from the fact that the novel has the form of a first-person narrative with a personal point of view, whose rule is the limitation of the narrator's awareness. Not only does he not take it into consideration, but also attempts to instruct the author (and other writers who would like to take up the topic) how such a novel should be written and what it should contain in order to meet with the acceptance of black radicals. In this respect Thelwell and many other black critics at that period practice a sort of prescriptive literary criticism, derivative of the concept of the Black Aesthetic which had provided an obligatory system of evaluation of art for African American critics of the younger generation. In those circles the autonomy of literature was extremely curtailed by the ideological and political needs of the moment.

Thus it is not surprising that in a situation where the standpoints of black and white critics were so strongly polarized, it was difficult if not entirely impossible to find compromise when

discussing general issues. Nonetheless, quite surprisingly there were also a few very concrete issues which revealed a profound gap between the white and black critical positions. One of them was the loyalty of the slaves to their white masters, and their active participation in subduing Turner's insurrection. In Styron's novel, the rebels encounter the resistance of armed black servants who do not hesitate to open fire against them. Thelwell questions the probability of such an event, and argues that no level-headed slave owner would have equipped his chattel with guns in those circumstances, simply being afraid that they would join the rebels. Eugene D. Genovese tries to discredit that argument, reminding Thelwell that according to what Turner says in his confession to Gray, he was discovered in his hole in the ground in the forest by two black men, who immediately informed their master about his hideaway. Genovese – a scholar specializing in African American history – finds the novel “historically sound,” and although he admits that “Styron takes liberties with fact, as every novelist does,” he remains of the opinion that at the same time the novelist “does not do violence to the historical record,” which “cannot be said for his critics” (Genovese 1982: 202-203).

Genovese maintains that “[i]t is pardonable for Styron to take liberties with the particular history of the Nat Turner revolt, so long as he does no violence to the history of the slave revolts generally. Here ... he has proved himself a better student of history than his critics” (Genovese 1982: 204). The historian points at another issue where they allegedly miss the truth, choosing as an example Thelwell's criticism that Styron gives too lenient a picture of slavery in Virginia at that time in his novel. Thelwell criticizes Styron for “only fleetingly mention[ing]” in his novel the fact that during the economic crisis of the 1830's, which resulted from “Virginia land being increasingly exhausted” by intensive tobacco cultivation, even so-called “enlightened” planters (i.e. those for whom slavery had ceased to be just a “financial operation” and became an “exercise in moral obligation”) turned to “breeding black men and women like animals for the purpose of supplying the labor markets of the Deep South” (Thelwell 1982: 192)¹.

Genovese argues that Thelwell, as he puts it, “criticizes Styron for *denying* that Virginia masters deliberately bred slaves, and refers to the incontrovertible evidence of huge slave sales to the lower South” (italics mine) out of ignorance: “had [the black critic] read the historical literature carefully,” he would understand the difference between “a system of deliberate breeding” and “the process of transferring surplus population” (Genovese 1982: 203); and, according to the historian, it is the latter that explains the dramatic statistical increase of slaves sold from Virginia to other Southern states at that period.

More recent scholarly publications, however, do not support Genovese's arguments. For example in her 2001 article titled “Un/Re/Dis Covering Slave Breeding in Thirteenth Amendment Jurisprudence” Pamela D. Bridgewater (2001: 22) refers to Virginia as “a leading slave breeding state.” Moreover, this fact is not denied in Styron's novel (and Thelwell knows it well; by saying that it is “only fleetingly mentioned,” he only implies that it is not given enough importance) – as testified by the bitter words spoken by Judge Cobb:

Now ... all we can raise is horses! ... Horses and what else, *what else?* Horses and pickaninnies! *Pickaninnies!* Little black infants by the score, the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands! The fairest state of them all, this tranquil and beloved domain – what has it now become? A *nursery* for Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas. A monstrous breeding farm to supply the sinew to gratify the maw of Eli Whitney's infernal machine... (Styron 1967: 69)

1 In this article I use the extended version of Thelwell's text, and not the abridged version from the collection *William Styron's Nat Turner. Ten Black Writers Respond*.

Styron is also strongly criticised by Thelwell and other black critics for his representation of "The Freed Slave," who is shown as a man lost, confused, starving, frequently drunk, entirely dependent on others, and incapable of functioning in society; in short: ill-adapted to freedom and taking responsibility for himself. In Styron's novel, the drunken freeman called Arnold is commented on by Turner as "[u]nschooled, unskilled, clumsy by nature, childlike and credulous," and as a result "more insignificant and wretched than he had ever been in slavery" (Styron 1967: 261). The black critics argue that such an image of "The Freed Slave" is seriously misleading since black freemen, who were present in every southern community, "worked as skilled artisans ... ; some, to their discredit, even owned slaves" (meaning that despite being immoral they were successful), and generally "represented a constant inspiration" for the slaves (Thelwell 1982: 191).

Nonetheless, Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West III, who have carefully read Styron's annotations on his copy of Drewry's dissertation and implement the method of comparative analysis, provide evidence that in the process of working on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* the novelist used one more important source: *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, a travel book by Frederick Law Olmstead, in which black freemen are described as "a miserable set of vagabonds, drunken, vicious, worse off ... than those who are retained in slavery" (Olmstead quoted after Casciato and West III 1982: 223). The critics demonstrate that "Styron was by no means careless about his use of historical fact, as many of his detractors have maintained" (Casciato and West III 1982: 213), but simultaneously they argue that whereas "in the more narrow and exacting sense, Styron was quite faithful to the historical record," he "may still be guilty of distorting 'history' in the larger sense" (Casciato and West III 1982: 223), a conclusion contrary to Genovese's claim, mentioned earlier. Casciato and West III assume that such distortions result from Styron's entering "imaginatively into the mind of a nineteenth-century black rebel" (Casciato and West III 1982: 223), about whom there is very little factual knowledge, and who is utterly different from a white writer from the South in terms of racial experiences.

There is no point in exhaustive discussion of the controversies pertaining to Styron's representation of the historical Nat Turner. However, it is worth sketching them. Black critics reproach the novelist for sullyng the memory of their hero, for instance by ascribing to him antipathy or even contempt for his fellow slaves (the novel contains a great number of extracts when Turner looks at other blacks with loathing and disgust) and equipping him with sexual "weaknesses" such as a homosexual episode in his early youth and his suppressed desire for a young white woman – the one he eventually kills (both are products of the author's imagination). In contrast to Styron's protagonist, as Lerone Bennett (1968) *wants to believe* – since the available historical sources do not reveal much about Turner's personal qualities – Turner was courageous, commanding, as well as virile, and demonstrated solidarity with his black brothers. It is worth a slight digression to note that such idealization of a black rebel-hero brings to mind the unrealistically positive images of black radicals in nineteenth-century novels with a purpose, for instance Madison Washington in Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853) or Henry in Martin R. Delany's novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859).

If it is entirely impossible to decide in those cases to what extent, or whether at all, Styron misses the truth, as we do not have enough historical data in this respect (hence the problem can be reduced to the question what sort of Nat Turner black critics would like to see), in several important and perfectly clear issues the novelist departs from the "known facts" in a surprising way.

For instance: "The Confessions of Nat Turner" transcribed by Gray (1831) reveals among other things that Turner was brought up in a complete family, that he was encouraged to learn reading by his parents who had shown him his first book to keep him from crying, that

Christianity was instilled in him by his grandmother to whom he was strongly attached, and that his intelligence was used by his peers in planning their stealing (and stealing was one of slaves' strategy of resistance). In Styron's novel, Turner is brought up by his mother, born in America soon after his grandmother had crossed the Atlantic on a slaver, and his mother goes insane and dies. He has no knowledge about his actual father, and his white master becomes a father figure. When his master discovers that little Nat has stolen a book and tried to learn reading by himself, he orders his daughter to provide the boy with an elementary education that also included religious matters, which even further alienates Nat from the community of slaves and strengthens his identification with the "superior" white culture.

George Core (1981: 218) maintains that "in a fictive sense and in the larger historical perspective it makes little or no difference who taught the actual Nat how to read, or whether ... his father ran away." Genovese (1982: 206) must be of the same opinion since he asks rhetorically: "How much can we make of Turner's having been taught to read by his parents? Who, after all, probably taught them? ... Styron did not invent white paternalism." Does this mean, however, that both white paternalism and the negative image of the black family must be sustained, especially in a case where the writer had opposite data at his disposal? Are we supposed to disregard the validity of a black critic's comment: "The primary source of information, of 'known facts,' is extremely brief, about 4,000 words. Why was it necessary, in this objective reconstruction, to depart from this source?" (Thelwell 1982: 189-190). What is more, Styron did this soon after publication of the Moynihan Report (1965), which placed responsibility for the social disintegration of the African American community and a series of riots in black ghettos in the 1960s on the dilapidation of the nuclear family among blacks in the United States, replacing it with a matriarchal model.

Perhaps black critics-polemicists, driven by the ideological necessities of the historical moment, are wrong when they repeat endlessly that as a rule no white writer is capable of rendering convincingly a black character due to the lack of similar experiences and the language barrier. However, we should not be surprised that they make such claims when their opinion is juxtaposed with a peculiar comment by Core, who sums up the issue in the following manner:

The author invests Nat with a sensibility and intelligence and range of knowledge which are doubtless greater than he in fact possessed as historical personage, but this is possible because so little is known of the actual Nat Turner. (Core 1981: 215)

It seems that the controversies and polemics about William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* resulted not only from an entirely different understanding by white and black critics and scholars of the question as to what literature is essentially and what social role it has to perform, but also from the incompatible implementation of historiography, in the realm of which both sides, consciously or not, place the novel. In his introduction to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, John Henrik Clarke (1968: vii) quotes the Marxist critic Herbert Aptheker whose words are used as an epigraph for the book: "History's potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalization, and legitimacy." Genovese (1982: 202) calls this sort of thinking "nonsense" which "sets the tone for the book," claiming that the purpose of historiography is always the truth.

Apparently, he does so too hastily: Hayden White, writing about the narrativisation of history, points out that it is characteristic of Marxist historians to perceive it, as Frederick Jameson does, as "a past from which one would wish to have descended" (White 1987: 149). Such a "genealogical" understanding of history, as contrasted with a "genetic" one that is concerned solely with the "past from which one actually had descended," serves the purpose of making it possible for desired projects to be "realized by living human agents in their

future” (White 1987: 149). Nonetheless, in the American socio-political reality that understanding was and still is – as proven by Baraka’s case – pre-determined to a large extent by the dividing line of color that frequently overlaps with ideological differences which prove exceedingly difficult to overcome.

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